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Dealing with the interplay of child image, protection and participation

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2019

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

van Bijleveld, G. G. (2019). *Dealing with the interplay of child image, protection and participation: A critical reflection on the essence of child participation in child protection services*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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Summary

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Introduction

Nowadays, child participation is internationally seen as a crucial aspect of child protection and child welfare. Ever since the nineties, encouraged from a children's rights perspective more attention has been given to the role children have in decision-making processes, especially concerning decisions that directly affect the child's life. Furthermore, social changes, such as an emphasis on people's own responsibility, a growing social involvement in themes such as child protection, more available knowledge and a focus on risk management also contribute to the increasing attention for participation. Within child protection and child welfare services, the increasing attention for children's right to have a say in decisions affecting their lives, is shown in laws, regulations and policies, where the children's rights to participation are more often and more specified recorded. And scientific research has shown that involving children in decision-making in child protection and child welfare services helps children in their development and contributes to implementing more appropriate interventions.

However, how to implement child participation in daily child protection practice, still raises questions. Despite the fact that more attention is being paid to the involvement of children in decision-making within youth protection, international studies show that it does not always mean that children are actually involved. Indeed, studies show that regardless of the increased focus on participation and the use of different interventions to promote participation, in youth protection and child welfare practice children still have little influence on the decisions that are made. Thus, what makes it so difficult to actively involve children in the decision-making process? And what challenges specifically apply to the context of youth protection?

In the Netherlands, on average, annually 375.000 children receive some kind of youth care. Although for the most part this consists of voluntary care services, for approximately 1,5% of all children (n=50.000) a judicial order is the basis of the involvement of a certified youth protection institution, either in the form of a child protection order or a juvenile parole order. Within the certified youth protection institutions, there is a growing awareness that children have to right to participate in the decision-making. For instance, it is now legally determined that children should be heard when a child protection order is at stake and policy documents often mention that children should be informed and heard. However, how these guidelines are executed in daily practice in the Netherlands, is hardly studied.

Summary

The aim of this thesis is to gain insight into how child participation has been shaped in the current practice of youth protection services in the Netherlands, to understand the challenges of child participation in child protection services, and to explore strategies for moving child participation forward in daily practice. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is meaningful participation within the child protection services: what are the perspectives of case managers, children and academics?
2. How does meaningful participation relate to child protection and existing child images and what barriers arise from this interaction?
3. What strategies are needed for children to move the participation agenda forward and what have children themselves to offer in this process of change?
4. What strategies are needed for case managers to address the identified barriers?

To answer these research questions, I conducted my research at the 'Jeugdbescherming Regio Amsterdam (JBRA)', the certified institute for child protection services in the Amsterdam area. JBRA's main goal is to guarantee the safety of all children in their supervision. When children enter their care, together with the family a plan is made to ensure that the children can grow up safely. This means that within the guidance of JBRA, decisive and far-reaching decisions are made, such as where and with whom a child grows up and how a child has contact with the parents. JBRA uses a system-oriented approach. Characteristic of this approach is that the problems within a family are viewed from a relational perspective and everyone is involved in the solution. It is also central that everyone who is involved feels heard.

Methodology

The data collection for this study was mainly through the use of participatory action-research (PAR). By using PAR the ideas and experiences of the experts, in this case the children in care and the case managers working at JBRA, are added to the conventional research approaches, and therefore everyday knowledge is added to broaden our view, improve our understanding and to make the outcomes more suitable for those experiencing the issue in daily life. A second base for PAR is that it goes beyond data gathering; it aims to use the acquired knowledge to feed strategies for action to make an actual change.

With the children, we particularly used action research as the research method. Action–research with children has proven suitable to obtain an understanding of, and at the same time improve, children’s experiences. Through cycles of action and reflection, it allows the children to choose and control how they express themselves, to reflect on what they find important, to determine what and when they want to share, and assist them in talking about more complex and sensitive issues. Especially new in this study is that the intervention, a toolbox filled with tools that can help children to express themselves in family meetings, was developed together with the children. Starting directly with the children ensured that their perspectives and needs were central and at the same time avoided the risk that adults determine what children think and need and what makes for them 'the right context for participation'. Working together with the children has led to the development of a toolbox that family managers used in practice to involve children in the conversation leading up to the decision-making process.

With the case managers, several research methods were used, including semi-structured interviews, (participatory) observations, focus group discussions and reflexive monitoring in action. The combination of these different methods has led to a profound understanding of experiences, opinions, and ideas of the case managers. Also, it provided an insight in the actual actions of the case managers with regard to child participation and the possible contradictions between what they think and do. During this study, emphasis was on developing understanding of daily practice together, by discovering what barriers the case managers face when implementing what children believe could help to facilitate participation. Based on the thought that both learning and reflection are essential for effective behavioural change, a Reflexive Monitoring in Action (RMA) approach, which stems from research into system innovation, was used, to come to recommendations for facilitating children's participation that suit the current practice.

Results

What is the current status of child participation within Dutch Child Protection Services and what are the views of children and case managers?

Both the children as the case managers agree that child participation is an important subject. They are also generally in agreement on the current levels of child participation: in practice child participation is more about informing and hearing the child, than it is about actually involving children in the decision-making process. For the children, participating in this study, it is important to be taken seriously as a partner in the conversation, which in their experiences often does not happen. They

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want to be heard, be able to express their opinions and to be explained why the final choices are made that way. They hardly mention having a say in the decision-making as a desire themselves. Moreover, they also indicate that they do not want to be involved in some conversations, as long as they know what is being discussed.

A second important aspect that the children indicated is that it is important to involve them from early age on. Especially the young people, aged 13 and older, expressed to have little faith that their opinions would ever be taken into consideration or that they could actually make a difference and have an influence on the process within child protection services. This feeling of helplessness was mainly due to negative experiences they had had until then, in particular that they had expressed their wishes and ideas, but they felt nothing was done with them and decisions were often made, without them understanding why. Contrary, the younger children (aged 6 – 13) showed that they had lots of ideas on how to be more involved in family meetings and they were also prepared to share these ideas, believing it can lead to an actual improvement in how children are involved in family meetings.

For the case managers too, participation is mainly about hearing and informing. They believe it is important for children to be asked what they think and that they know what to expect. However, in daily practice this is hindered by the urge of the case managers to protect the children and to shield the children from being burdened with adult issues. The tension case managers experience between involving and protecting children leads in practice often to a difference in what case managers say and what they actually do: the case managers often in advance have the idea of actively involving children in the conversations, but during the family meetings, they switch to a focus on protection, often leading to choosing to not involving children or even to exclude the child from the conversation. Furthermore, a lot of emphasis is placed on verbal communication: the contact with the children is often in meetings. During these meetings also parents or other adults are present, who are often verbally stronger than the child. Within these meetings, little attention is paid to whether a child feels capable of expressing itself and feels heard. Finally, it emerged that the subject of participation is hardly discussed within the organization and with colleagues, and therefore, the subject of child participation is often not on the mind of case managers.

The relationship between participation, protection and child image

The results of this study expose a complex interplay between participation, protection and child image. For child participation, children should be seen as 'knowledgeable social actors': one has to believe that children are not just influenced by their social

environment, but actively influence their social environment. Therefore, the child image a case manager embodies is a determining value in whether and how a case manager will facilitate child participation. This study found that, although the child image contains aspects from multiple discourses, the caretakers' perspective is the most dominant due to the emphasis on protection from and the prevention of abuse and neglect. This being the strongest, deep-seated, not always conscious view of children and childhood had a strong impact on case managers' actions in relation to participation and protection; namely that they switch to a mode in which they take over on behalf of the child and make the decisions themselves, in the belief that they are acting in the child's best interest. However, by actively discussing the subject of child participation, reflecting on own actions, and discussing the underlying view of children, the case managers gradually became aware that they themselves are the biggest barrier in facilitating child participation.

Strategies for moving the participation agenda forward in daily child protection services

Actively involving the children and considering them as experts showed that, before talking about child participation in the decision-making, children first need to feel taken seriously as a conversation partner. Therefore, children want explicit attention agreements about who, when, what shares with each other and how the information of everyone is included in the process. Where it is often said that time is needed to build a relationship of trust, the children indicate that this trust is not so much dependent on time, but more of making clear conversation arrangements. Also, attention should be given to the fact that every child is different and therefore might have different needs to share information. The children participating showed that even at a young age, they have clear ideas of what works for them and are capable of expressing their needs. Moreover, the results of this project have also shown that when children are only involved later in life, they do not feel taken seriously anymore and tend to drop out quickly. For family managers it is therefore important in every meeting, with every child, to first pay attention to how information is shared with each other, who has what role, what happens to the information and what works for this specific child.

For the case managers it is necessary, according to the results of this study, that they become aware of the complexity of child participation within the field of child protection services, and the relationship with the child image. For this it is necessary that they have more knowledge of what child participation entails, but also of different child images and how they relate to participation and protection. But above all, this study shows that recognizing one's own unconscious actions and motives is

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crucial for actually changing the extent to which children are involved. Case managers often act differently than they think, which means that they have to become more aware of why they make certain choices and what the consequences are. In order to achieve this, the case managers themselves indicate that the subject of child participation should be more prominent in the organization and should be discussed more with each other, whereby reflecting on one's own actions is crucial.

Conclusions

This study has shown that facilitating child participation in child protection services is a complex matter that requires a great deal from children, professionals and the organizations they work at. All parties involved indicate that they see the importance of child participation and that it should be more effective in practice. The results also show that, in current practice, both case managers and children are still novices in terms of child participation. Moreover, this study shows that facilitating child participation is not something you 'just do' and that the use of an intervention is sufficient to achieve change.

First of all, it is important to define what meaningful participation within the context of child protection services entails. Although this can differ between every child and every situation, there certainly are aspects that apply to all. This study shows that meaningful participation requires the following aspects: (1) making clear agreements on how to deal and communicate with each other, including why this is important; (2) what each person needs to feel welcomed/appreciated and how each person makes known what he or she thinks is important; (3) informing what will happen with the information given, and what the involvement of youth protection means; (4) ensuring that everyone has expressed their wishes, feels they are being taken seriously; and (5) explaining the decisions made and how each and everyone's opinions have been taken into account, with special attention to if necessary to explaining why certain options are not possible, while acknowledging the child's wishes and experiences are taken seriously. Furthermore, it should be realised that participation is not a one-off action, but a continuous process and therefore needs constant attention. Overall, then this requires of the case manager that with every new case and client, they start with asking attention for participation, explaining what it entails, why they value it so much, asking how individuals feel comfortable in sharing their needs, give examples, and always share afterwards and how they will facilitate this. Furthermore, it asks that with every child, they examine how in this specific case and in this specific context they will communicate with each other.

In addition to the fact that it must be clear what meaningful participation entails and what is necessary to realize this, the interaction between participation, protection and child image must also be taken into account. Although within JBRA the willingness to involve children more in the decision-making process is certainly present, the present dominant child image of children as 'vulnerable' and 'in need of protection' poses a risk for actually involving children in the complex, often considered as 'adult decisions' that have to be made. And especially in the context of being held responsible by society for the safekeeping of children, child protection, with a major focus on limiting risks, the whole society looking over their shoulders and judges when things go wrong, this image of vulnerable children is even reinforced.

Therefore, in order to better facilitate child participation, it is crucial that all three aspects, participation, protection and child image, are taken into account in the change process. It is necessary that the participation of children is made more explicit in practice and that the views of the organization, the case managers and the children are brought together, with consideration being given to the child images and how this influences participation (and where need to be adjusted). Because where tools can help the case managers, the case manager himself remains the main instrument to facilitate participation. It requires case managers to have knowledge about participation and child images, to dare to pose themselves vulnerable and to dare to make mistakes, to be able to balance between different needs of different persons and to deal with the pressure from society. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for case managers to have the time and space to reflect on their own actions, in order to become aware of the existing child images, how these child images influence their actions, how the context of protection in which they work influences those child images, but also on how participation can strengthen protection. Only then the case managers will be able to create a setting in which children feel more heard and taken seriously, which is the start to an actual change in the role children play in the decision-making process can be achieved, whereby the children's knowledge and perspectives are taken into account in the decisions taken within child protection services.